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SUBJECT: Ethnicity & Politics in Kenya: Part 1, The
British Heritage

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A common Kenyan view of the colonial period holds that blatant favoritism by those in power on behalf of their own ethnic group was never more intense than in Kenya's first 68 years of its 111 year existence. Major political figures in today's Kenya were in their 30s at independence, and so directly experienced how government at that time greatly favored the tiny settler minority. While many Kenyans believe that their country must overcome this heritage of ethnic favoritism in governance if they are to achieve higher levels of economic and social progress, they nevertheless resent "hypocritical" preaching on the subject when it comes from "whites" in general and the British in particular. Foreigners, especially white foreigners, when speaking to Kenyan audiences on the topic of ethnicity and governance, would do well to start off with a frank acknowledgement about struggles for fair treatment for all in their own societies. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) While polls suggest that issues-based politics is slowly gaining ground among Kenyan voters, the 2007 national elections will still largely be determined by the ability of key politicians to use ethnic rhetoric, money, patronage and muscle to win over ethnic voting blocs. By "ethnic rhetoric" we mean both appeals to group solidarity to promote the political influence of a community and hence the flow of state resources to that community and rhetoric that stokes traditional inter-ethnic resentments for political mobilization purposes. This message presents a commonly held Kenyan view about the British colonial period as it relates to politics and ethnicity. PolCouns gleaned this "narrative" of the colonial experience from discussions with Kenyans from many walks of life and regions of the country as well as reading various Kenyan writers and editorialists. Our senior Kenyan colleagues concur that the views expressed here do indeed reflect the thinking of many Kenyan voters. Septels will discuss Kenya's major ethnic voting blocs, the dangerously intense Luo-Kikuyu rivalry, and religious identity politics.

The British Heritage: Some Things Never Change

¶3. (SBU) Note: The following does not purport to be an objective balance sheet of the British formation and administration of Kenya. Rather, it presents common Kenyan attitudes about that period as it relates to politics and ethnicity. End Note.

¶4. (SBU) Kenya was formally established as a political entity in 1895. Effective control of the entire territory was achieved in the early 1900s, although the British administration never bothered to assert full control over large swathes of unproductive Northern Kenya, leaving those areas mostly ungoverned. Government investment in administration and infrastructure concentrated heavily on regions inhabited by the ethnic

group in power: white settlers and representatives of the British government. Throughout nearly the entire 68 years of British administration, Kenya's formative period as a political entity, white settlers alone were permitted to organize themselves politically and lobby the administration. (Note: A few elected seats for "Africans" was established by the administration just before independence in 1963. End Note.) The settler minority used their exclusive political clout to win for themselves large tracts of the most productive land, a monopoly on the production of the most important cash crops, and preferential treatment by the administration in all matters (security, education, employment in the state bureaucracy and military, etc.). State security forces were used to seize the best lands from the prior inhabitants (mostly Kikuyu in the central highlands) for redistribution to the settlers. The state enforced the settlers' monopoly on cash crop production and granted many other privileges to the small settler minority.

15. (SBU) Is this all just irrelevant ancient history? Not really. Several of today's major Kenyan political figures were in their 30's at independence in 1963. Their views of politics and the relation of the state to a favored ethnic group were affected by what they observed under British administration. Many establishment politicians come from families that served the British administration (appointed traditional leaders, junior civil service, police, military), and so gained first hand knowledge of how the system worked.

16. (SBU) The history of "White Kenya" is marked by shady land deals backed by corrupt courts in thrall to the richest and most politically well-connected settlers. It

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is also marked by increasing numbers of dispossessed landless farmers drawn from disfavored ethnic groups (that is, all other groups except for whites, but especially those groups inhabiting the richest lands, such as the Kikuyu). Shady land deals, corrupt courts answerable only to the rich and politically well-connected, and farmers from out of favor ethnic communities dispossessed from their lands by the state; all these continue to be major issues in Kenya today.

17. (SBU) Many Kenyans consider that the phenomenon of rulers favoring their own ethnic community was never more intense and blatant than in Kenya's first 68 years of its 111 year existence. While many Kenyans truly believe that their country must overcome this inherited style of bad governance if they are to achieve higher levels of economic and social progress, they nevertheless resent preaching on the subject when it comes from "whites" in general and the British in particular. They tend to note, with a smirk, that those preaching virtue come from the same ethnic community ("whites") that committed the gravest sins in this regard when they were in power in Kenya. Foreigners, especially white foreigners, when speaking to Kenyan audiences on the topic of ethnicity and governance, would do well to start off with a frank acknowledgement about struggles for fair treatment for all in their own societies.

RANNEBERGER